

Indian Sacred Sites
Draft Information Paper
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Introduction

Sacred sites or places are often vital to the cultural and spiritual wellbeing of Indian tribes and other indigenous peoples. These places may be directly tied to the cultural identity of an Indian tribe and impacts to or destruction of such places can interrupt, eliminate, or adversely affect important cultural practices and beliefs.

This paper discusses Indian sacred sites in very general terms and is only intended to provide the reader with a basic understanding about the kinds of places that might be sacred to Indian tribes and why. This information is offered to help the general public, local planners, state officials, developers, and others better understand sacred sites and how they can help protect them.

What is an Indian sacred site?

For the non-practitioner, sacred sites and places may be difficult to recognize. They may look like elements of the natural landscape such as a mountain or body of water and, thus, be indistinguishable to someone outside the tribal culture.

Sacred sites are often land based and may also include large and small animals, plants, water and other natural features. For instance, tribal creation or emergence beliefs often involve these features. In general, tribal people have a special relationship with the land. Sacred places may be revered through or described in songs, stories, ceremonies, and place names.

Humans and the land, with all its features, are considered to be in constant relationship to one another. Unlike many non-tribal belief systems, a fundamental philosophy of many tribal beliefs is that each being is part of a whole ecosystem. In essence, there is a cosmos or universe that represents a whole in which human beings take part. In order to maintain this mutual relationship, tribes seek spiritual associations with the land to sustain orderly balance and harmony with the universe.

Sacred sites do not exist in a spiritual or physical vacuum. That is, sacred sites may be a singular focal point for a particular aspect of a larger “sacred place” that could be an entire landscape. Often, a sacred site (a geographically discrete location) connects to a series of other sacred sites (within a geographically less-defined boundary) that may relate to specific ceremonies tied to a larger belief system. The aggregate of these sites—relating to larger physical features, landscapes, animal or plant species, or other aspects of the natural world—may be considered a sacred place. The relatively less bounded idea of sacred places differentiates them from the singular, geographically bounded idea of sacred sites. The concept of sacred places is generally more inclusive and expansive, though they are not mutually exclusive. Sacred sites can also be sacred places.

Indian traditional practitioners’ ceremonial uses of sacred sites and places are frequently inextricably connected to the landscape surrounding them. Think of a view shed as an analogous concept.

Why is it important to protect Indian sacred sites and places?

Without these sacred sites or places, tribal communities would no longer have a spiritual connection to the earth, the sky, and spiritual beings. When the places with which they are culturally identified or where they practice their beliefs are impacted or destroyed, tribal communities and cultures suffer. A tribal community may no longer be able to pass its traditions, language and beliefs on to the next generation.

How can you help?

Only by gaining an understanding of sacred places can land owners, the general public, state and local planners and developers be equipped to protect the ceremonial use and physical integrity of sacred sites and places. Here are some suggestions:

- Learn as much as you can. If you are planning an activity that may alter parts of landscapes in which an Indian tribe has an historical or current interest, ask them what you can do to avoid harming any sacred sites or places there. Understand that tribal people may be reluctant or unwilling to share sacred information with you because it may be inappropriate for them to do so.
- If you are unsure if a place is sacred, “walk” lightly anyway. In other words, do no harm by not cutting down plants or digging into the land. And, of course, if you are on federal land, such activities may be illegal unless you already have a permit. Such activities may also be illegal on state or other public land, so know the rules.
- For further background and context, you should read:
 - the *Report to the Secretary of Agriculture - USDA Policy and Procedures Review and Recommendations: Indian Sacred Sites* (<http://www.fs.fed.us/spf/tribalrelations/documents/sacredsites/SacredSitesFinalReportDec2012.pdf>) and
 - the *Interagency Sacred Sites MOU* (<http://www.fs.fed.us/spf/tribalrelations/sacredsitesmou.shtml>)